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ABSTRACT

An Australian study explored the implications of being a rural academic; distinguishing features of rural academics' work; perceptions of rural academics held by themselves and others; and contributions rural academics make to their institutions, disciplines, and communities. Interviews were conducted with 24 faculty members from 2 Australian universities that have both metropolitan and rural campuses. Distinguishing features of rural academics included the ability to teach across a wider range of subject areas and to be more flexible in course delivery methods; a workload that was stressful despite smaller classes; a closer relationship with the surrounding community; a better community atmosphere on campus; some limitations on research because of smaller academic staff groups; more cross-discipline links and location-influenced opportunities for research; a perception that the rural lifestyle was more relaxed and safer; and some deprivation from lack of things associated with a metropolitan lifestyle. Academics with no experience at a rural campus focused on perceived negative aspects of rural academics. Advantages and disadvantages are discussed in the areas of research and publishing, professional development and study leave opportunities, promotion prospects, and workload. Contributions of rural academics include educational access for rural residents, identification of rural needs and issues, and the provision of role models. Most metropolitan interviewees had no wish to move to a rural campus, but many of those with rural experience saw it as a potential lifelong career. (TD)

Annual National Research Forum of the Australian Rural Education Research Association Inc.

3 December 1999

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Abstract

While the work of rural academics shares much in common with the work of metropolitan colleagues, there are distinctive aspects. Academic studies of regional educational institutions and their students and of other rural professional groups have tended to neglect the rural academics themselves. This collaborative study by researchers from two universities, both of which have metropolitan and rural campuses, explores the implications of being a rural academic, distinguishing features of rural academics' work, and the perceptions of rural academics held by themselves and others. The contributions rural academics make to their institutions, to their disciplines and to their communities are highlighted.

Background and introduction

In benchmarking exercises and discussions with other regional campuses of predominantly metropolitan-based universities, shared aspects of the work of rural academics arose. These related to their separation from the other campuses of their institutions, and demonstrated to those involved the value of networking among academics working in similar contexts, and of identifying the nature and value of the work that they do.

As with other professions, the work of a rural academic shares aspects of the work of metropolitan colleagues but also has distinctive features. Recognising that there is this difference, and finding in a preliminary review of literature a lack of work relating to this area, it was considered that this would be an important subject for investigation.

A survey of regional campuses in the 1970s (Batt, Anderson, Beswick, Harman & Selby Smith 1975) outlined characteristics of these contexts, but at a time before former colleges of advanced education, institutes of technology and universities were brought into a unified higher education system by a series of amalgamations. There is a significant body of research that has described other groups of professionals in a rural context: for example, social workers (Cheers 1990; Dollard, Winefield & Winefield 1999), teachers, accountants (Sawyer & Munn 1996; 1998), and health professionals (Huntley 1991). There have also been studies of higher education students in and from rural contexts (for example, Hicks, Johnston & Hipp 1998). Recent and continuing studies of academic life and work, such as that carried out by the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education in 1999 (funded by the Evaluations and Investigations Program of the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, as was a 1996 study by Sheehan, Welch and Lacy) and a doctoral study by Scown (1999) serve to highlight the lack of recent studies relating specifically to the work of academics in the rural context.

Here we give an overview of a study, still in progress, which will help to fill the gap by exploring the implications of being a rural academic, the distinguishing features of rural academics' work, and the perceptions of rural academics held by themselves and by others. The study will identify the knowledge,

attitudes and skills that rural academics bring to their work within the university context, highlighting the diversity of the contributions of this higher education sector human resource. This paper focuses on what has been learned from the interview stage of the study, the title picking up the pluses and minuses of life as a rural academic that participants have identified: the advantages that in most cases compensate for any limitations.

Aims and outcomes of the study

Our study aims to

- identify those who constitute the group, 'working rural academics', and the characteristics of their work
- explore the implications of being a rural academic: research interests and opportunities, workload, promotion prospects, opportunities for professional development and study leave
- compare rural academics' perceptions of themselves as rural academics with metropolitan (non-rural) academics' perceptions of rural academics
- compare rural and metropolitan academics' perceptions of working at rural campuses
- identify the contributions of rural academics to their institutions, to academia in general and to the communities in which they are situated.

To date the study has provided access to a greater understanding of the working life of rural academics. It has also been a valuable opportunity for collaborative research with benchmarking partners. It is anticipated that the completed study will extend these and provide:

- feedback to staff
- information to inform funding allocations and promotion policies
- data that will be useful to university management in reaching goals related to rural and isolated students and other targeted equity groups and Indigenous students
- insights valuable in pursuing international outreach to rural areas of wider university markets
- a contribution to a growing rural and regional issues knowledge base.

Research procedure

In-depth interviews (30-40 minutes in length) of rural and metropolitan academics were conducted (in most cases tape-recorded and transcribed, a small number being replaced by written answers to the survey questions). The transcribed text of each interview was made available to interviewees for editing and authenticating. Twenty-four academics were selected: four each in regional South Australian and regional Victorian situations, four in each of these states whose academic work had been only at a metropolitan campus, and four in each state who had worked as academics in both regional and metropolitan settings. The regional academics and those who had worked in both contexts were selected so that there was as much variation as possible (gender, discipline, length of service, ethnicity). The metropolitan-only academics were randomly selected until these maximum variation criteria were met. A reasonable gender balance was achieved. About a third of the participants had been born outside of Australia. With the small sample involved, the full range of academic employment levels and length of service could not be covered; in fact, there were only two Level A participants, two at Level D and none

at Level E, few who had been academics for less than five years and only two part-time participants. The participants' disciplines included: Education, Nursing, Mathematics and Statistics, Chemistry, Communication and Journalism, Ecology, Psychology, Accounting, Law, Engineering, Social Work, Computer and Information Science, Speech Pathology and Occupational Therapy.

Using insights gained in these interviews, we plan to conduct a larger survey of academics at the universities involved: all regional academics and a random sample of metropolitan academics. This is still to be designed and carried out. Surveying academics who have recently left academia, or recently arrived, is also being considered. The fact that the study will involve participants from two institutions and a number of campuses will help to guarantee anonymity.

Interview insights

Contrasting perceptions

For those who were working or had worked as rural academics, their descriptions of being in that situation included aspects of the work itself and also lifestyle considerations. Some considered that being a rural academic simply meant being an academic with a rural focus, but distinguishing features were identified. These included: a need to be more flexible and to become multi-skilled in teaching across a wider range of subject areas, as well as an opportunity to be more flexible in course delivery methods; a workload that was stressful because of the number of contact hours involved, despite smaller classes; a knowledge of the 'big picture' on the campus and beyond, gained partly through attendance at a host of time-consuming meetings; a closer relationship with the surrounding community, often including professional links; a better community atmosphere at the campus; a closer relationship with students of all academic abilities; some limitations on research because of the smaller academic staff group, but on the other hand more cross-discipline links and location-influenced opportunities for research and consultancies. Lifestyle factors included: the little time needed for travelling between home and work for most of the staff, but on the other hand time used up by some in travelling to attend meetings in the capital; the country lifestyle was seen as more relaxed, safer, better for young families, but there was a recognition of some deprivation as a result of lack of access to things associated with a metropolitan lifestyle.

Those who had not worked at a rural campus (but often had some sort of awareness of what it might be like through having colleagues there in the same course) tended to focus on the negatives, considering that there would be a feeling of isolation, a lack of resources and support, with more teaching and not much research, frustration at being dictated to by the metropolitan campuses, and an unwelcome need to be a Jack/Jill-of-all-trades. However, the students were seen as more likely to be enthusiastic and there because they wanted to be there. (In fact, some metropolitan students have been excluded from a metropolitan quota but have been able to gain admission to a regional campus course.) There was also some recognition that it would be the ideal location for certain types of research.

With regard to how rural academics felt that they were regarded by their metropolitan counterparts, perceptions varied, depending on the particular group of metropolitan academics to whom the interviewee related; there were also differences over time within the one discipline area. The variation resulted not only from individual personalities but also the amount of contact between geographically separated academics. Rural academics' feelings ranged from 'isolated', 'different', 'forgotten', 'considered inferior', 'bludging off the work done in the city' to finding their metropolitan colleagues to be 'sympathetic', 'interested', 'affirming and respectful' and holding their regional colleagues in high regard and asking their advice. It was significant that 'surprise' was mentioned at the quality of research done away from the city. Another said that he was sure his metropolitan colleagues thought that he was simply insane because of all the work he took on.

Metropolitan perceptions of rural academics were likewise influenced by the amount of contact with rural colleagues. In general there was a lack of knowledge, but comments focused on perceived negative aspects referred to above such as isolation, lack of control over the work, etc.

A possible source of reflections on the academic experience was any writings on this theme by the interviewees themselves. However, while a few had written on their experiences in teaching in their own particular area, their approach to particular subjects, etc., in most cases they had not written about being an academic, except for a couple who had given lectures about it, but not on the rural academic experience. One planned to write in his retirement all the things that he would like to say right now!

Areas of possible disadvantage

The 'swings and roundabouts' theme was evident in responses concerning the areas of research and publishing, study leave and other professional development opportunities, promotion prospects and workload. These are of course overlapping or interconnecting areas: for example, workload determines the time available for research and publishing, which in turn influence promotion prospects. In what follows, comments are based on contributions by both metropolitan and rural academics. These have not been separated when the metropolitan perceptions agreed with the rural experience/perceptions.

Research and publishing

Time factors and access to resources and people were influencing factors. Opinions (of people in both situations) varied as to whether it was easier or more difficult to research and publish from a rural base. With regard to time for research, a lot more time was taken up for metropolitan-based academics in simply getting to the campus, parking, etc. which ate into their available time for thinking along research lines. However, the need for attendance at metropolitan meetings also used up time for a lot of rural academics. The different nature of rural workloads, with less opportunity to specialise in one subject area, and sometimes having to spend a lot of time on developing a new subject area and necessary infrastructure, militated against focusing on research: being able to specialise and focus meant that one could more easily identify a niche that would provide something to write about. On the other hand, research with a specifically regional focus was facilitated by being located close to associated community contacts: 'The thing that rural academics need to do is capitalise on their rurality, and not try to do what people who are not in rural settings are doing.' Access to resources was improved by the Internet and electronic communication. Sometimes rural library services were more obliging, but on the other hand some metropolitan staff had more research administrative assistance. There was a sense of being deprived in the rural area of the stimulation, the 'dynamic interaction', that comes from discussion with a larger number of colleagues in one's own field, and which helps in keeping up-to-date with developments, grant opportunities, collaborative projects, etc. In some fields specialised equipment was available only in the metropolitan area. Possible mentors were likewise often at a distance. A need to build up a research culture was identified: 'we are seriously short on role models and inspiration to carry out real research'. The comparative lack of postgraduate students, and the uncertainty of keeping quality students at the campus, was seen as another research limitation. While publishing in journals did not cost financially, it was more likely to happen following publishing via conferences, influenced by the availability of funding to allow or encourage this.

Professional development and study leave opportunities

Distance from the venues for most professional development activities influenced rural academics' willingness and/or ability to avail themselves of these opportunities. It was difficult to justify taking the time involved to attend something like a lunch-time session in the city. There was also the greater financial cost because of the travel. Some opportunities arose when professional development activities were put on at the rural campus by visiting or resident expertise, but attendances did not always demonstrate that these were appreciated. On the other hand, without the constraints of this travelling time, some city-based academics did not take up nearer opportunities because of pressure of other commitments: 'I don't think I wouldn't get approval to attend seminars, but I've just been so busy that I haven't really made an attempt because nobody does my work while I'm away.' The view was expressed that the most effective professional development is what one arranges oneself. A lot of staff development occurs informally through discussion with colleagues, where a collegial campus

atmosphere facilitates this; cross-discipline networking may be more feasible on a multi-discipline rural campus, but electronic communication may have to supplement discussions within one's field of research. Conference attendance (for academics in both situations) was affected by funding availability (which varied from school to school) and the extent to which this was necessary because of personal circumstances, but the travel costs for rural academics were often higher, involving additional fares and perhaps additional accommodation expenses. The advantages of external study opportunities for upgrading qualifications were pointed out. While some felt supported by their superiors in their wish to take study leave, others did not. These opportunities, vital for keeping up-to-date in many professional areas, were affected most by the lack of other staff in the same area to pick up the rural leave-taker's workload, or a feeling of imposing on others: 'many of us feel that even asking for study leave is like stabbing our co-workers in the back'. Cooperative arrangements involving metropolitan staff had enabled some study leave to happen, but this could not be relied on for the future.

Promotion prospects

While some focused on equity policies that were designed to guarantee that people from all campuses were treated fairly in regard to eligibility for promotion, as well as on a growing valuing of good teaching as a criterion for promotion in addition to demonstrated research outcomes, other interviewees were divided as to whether or not promotion prospects were more difficult at a rural campus. One thought that rural academics' ability to develop closer rapport with students could produce more favourable evaluations of their teaching. It was mentioned that people had gone to the rural campus in the first place as a promotion step. Once there, further moves up the ladder (with possibly fewer rungs) could depend on the extent to which the research criterion was emphasised and whether the location had affected the individual's ability to carry out research and publish. A lack of postgraduate supervision experience, because of there being few postgraduate students at the campus, was also a disadvantage. The values of members of promotion panels were also a factor: 'If you are looking for somebody to fill a [Senior Lecturer] position in a regional campus, you might want somebody who has got more nous on how to interact with their community [rather than a huge research record]'. Some felt that, while there might be fewer promotion positions at the rural campus, there would also be less competition for those places, a perception at odds with the reality: there is university-wide competition for promotion. Opportunities to be on university committees also had a bearing on ability to network and become known, if promotion was being sought away from the rural campus, but individuals differed as to whether this was easier or more difficult for the rural academic. A possible lack of good mentoring and esteemed referees were considered other disadvantaging factors.

Workload

Workload cannot simply be equated with number of hours worked. Stressors arising from unavailable equipment or teaching spaces, or a lack of control over one's own work contribute to a feeling of being overworked, while a pleasant work environment (facilities and people) can help one to feel less stressed. Again, perceptions varied, even among people in similar situations, concerning whether rural or metropolitan academics had the heavier workload. The biggest obvious contrast tended to be smaller classes, but more of them, at rural campuses, with large student numbers in the metropolitan area, but with more chance to be able to specialise in one subject area rather than having one's energies spread over a number of subjects. While tutors often assisted with the mountain of marking for the large city classes, organising them and quality control brought additional worries. More flexibility with timetabling and numbers in the rural setting allowed rural lecturers to feel more in control of their workload: being able to choose whether to combine smaller groups or keep them separate, or to provide additional class time (increasing formal teaching hours but cutting down on individual out-of-class consultations). On the other hand, there was, depending on the course concerned, a measure of control from the metropolitan head of school which could have the opposite effect. Whereas rural academics often felt overworked because of the number of teaching hours, and also other campus involvements and responsibilities, metropolitan academics often thought that their rural counterparts got off lightly because of low student numbers and some work being planned by metropolitan staff. Cross-campus teaching brought additional pressure. Some former rural academics felt that they were working much harder in the metropolitan area, despite being on fewer committees than they had been while in the country, and despite not having to refocus constantly on different subjects. It was also acknowledged

that pressures on academics were increasing from many directions, but especially from staff cutbacks, whatever the location.

Contributions

While a sense that they are being fairly treated in respect to the areas just discussed can play a large role in people's job satisfaction, along with congenial working conditions and relationships, for many people it could no doubt also be influenced by a feeling that they are making a worthwhile contribution. (Some perhaps feel that they are contributing to the extent that they are being exploited!) So how do rural academics contribute to their institution, discipline and community? Are these contributions similar or distinct from contributions made by metropolitan academics? A brief indication of the areas of contribution and differences between rural and metropolitan contributions follows. (A more detailed analysis is planned for a later paper.)

Having a campus in a rural area allows the institution to have a credible claim to be concerned about equity of educational access for people from non-metropolitan areas: without rural academics it could not maintain this physical presence. Rural academics as part of their campus and individually bring financial benefits to their community, as well as a reservoir of varied expertise. As well as contributing to the institution's teaching, research and community service reputation, as all academics are expected to do, rural academics are able to identify rural needs and issues, ensuring that these are not forgotten by their metropolitan colleagues and by university management, and bring 'a new dimension', being 'a reminder that there are different ways of seeing the world, and that there is diversity in the way things have to be done.' Being role models, inspiring local students, who are likely to be better prepared for working in rural areas, as well as preparing students from outside of the area for possible rural careers, are avenues for academics to provide long-term benefits to the community, to which, in general, they feel and are seen to be more closely connected than most metropolitan academics are to their immediate geographic surroundings. The incorporating of a rural perspective, including the experience of rural practice with all its diversity, has benefits for the discipline (the field of study as well as the profession to which it relates) as well as for the institution. Rural academics contribute to raising the profile of their discipline in the community and more widely through their successful students as well as through their research, publications, consultancy and community service, including support for local professional organisations. Their innovative approaches can broaden the scope of a discipline and within it bring solutions to local needs. A metropolitan academic felt that 'regional academics can bring an intensity of focus onto applied research which can correct problems in existing research or theorisation.' It was also stressed that rural academics 'are not just academics that are always rural in everything we do, we are also people who are practitioners and thinkers' in a particular field and should be valued for other things as well as a rural point of view.

A lifelong career?

Most of the metropolitan interviewees had no wish to move to a rural campus. One metropolitan academic expressed a real desire to move to a rural campus in the near future, feeling that current research interests could also be pursued there (and that person had had experience of rural life as a farmer). Another thought that it could be a good step just prior to retirement in a rural area. A particular research centre linked with some area-specific field of study could be an attraction. Another was attracted to the general idea of moving to a rural campus, depending on personal and career circumstances. However, a larger number of those who had experienced rural academic life did see it as a potential lifelong career. Some were in the rural area, and felt that others they knew were also, because that was where they wanted to live, or they had family ties or other commitments there and would find it

hard to move. Some had seen it initially as a temporary step, either away from the city or away from another occupation in the country, but found that it agreed with them and they had stayed longer than originally planned. Only one was mainly negative, and fairly negative about the whole academic experience, but saw the situation as useful for the insights it gave. In some cases the situation was what suited them now, but they could see that family or professional circumstances could change. It was often a case of, 'it all depends': on continuing to enjoy the work, on how people are treated, whether opportunities for research continue, and whether the job security is seen as guaranteed. One felt that academics had to think of themselves as 'more mobile ... a *citizen of the world* ... You can't take that narrow parochial view of yourself - I don't see any context of academic as being anything more than transient.' Combining part-time academic work with other professional practice was seen as a possibility, with a recognition that effectiveness in a rural location may depend on being prepared to remain there for some time.

Conclusion

For many participants in this study, being a rural academic is a calling providing deep satisfaction, at least at the present stage of their careers. However, it is not what everyone wants for themselves or forever. Most who see it as a potential long-term or possibly lifelong career recognise that there are drawbacks to being based at a rural campus; there are pluses and minuses, just as with most situations in life, or, as one rural academic said, 'Life is full of trade-offs.' Many of those interviewed, whether city-based or regional, could agree that 'what one loses on the swings, one makes on the roundabouts' - while some may think wistfully about some aspects of the opposite situation, the advantages and disadvantages of each in general balance out in the end.

An understanding of how rural academics work has policy implications for the institution and an impact on the quality of its graduates and the qualities they bring to the world outside academia. Similarities and differences in the work of rural academics compared with their non-rural counterparts have implications for fair employment conditions. Rural academics are the champions of a knowledge-base relevant to many important areas of non-metropolitan living (health, education, welfare, finance, regional development and many more) and as such have a vital, valuable role to play in their institutions, disciplines and communities.

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